

THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Medicine

CANCER QUACKS

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IN 1682 a Swiss physician proposed "an unguent of green frogs" as a cure for cancer. History repeats itself, for nearly 250 years later, in 1927, "a live green European frog, roasted in butter and rubbed to a powder" was seriously suggested as an equally infallible remedy. Spurious cancer cures are thus as absurd today as they were centuries ago, and even more numerous. The scientific knowledge regarding malignant disease makes progress, but not the unscientific. Naïveté and delusion, ignorance and quackery, are still rampant.

Such cures for cancer as suckling puppies boiled in wine, cray fish stewed in asses' milk, and the flesh of grey lizards, all of which were put forward in the Eighteenth Century, are no more ridiculous than quince seeds mixed with pig's blood, live toads applied to the tumor, or the assiduous avoidance of angleworms. These last three preposterous suggestions might seem to belong to the Middle Ages, and yet they were made in good faith in the presumably enlightened Twentieth Century. They are representative of a vast number of reputed cures submitted five years ago in answer to the offer of a prize for a remedy of proved value, announced through the American Society for the Control of Cancer.

On June 19, 1731, Benjamin Franklin wrote to his sister:

I know a cancer on the breast is often thought incurable, yet we have here in town a kind of shell made of some wood,

cut at a proper time, by some man of great skill (as they say), which has done wonders in that disease among us, being worn for some time on the breast. I am not apt to be superstitiously fond of believing such things, but the instances are so well attested as to convince the most incredulous.

This epistle was brought forth by the news that another of the great statesman's sisters was afflicted with cancer, a disease which, incidentally, also caused the death in 1808 of his only daughter, Mrs. Sarah Bache. About twenty years later, or in 1752, he wrote to a friend that he was pleased to learn of the success of poke-weed in the treatment of cancer. In 1927 a dozen or more persons submitted *récipés* using poke-root or poke-berries for the cure of all malignant growths. None of these modern cancer soothsayers had the temerity to advocate a third remedy in which the illustrious Franklin was interested in 1772. This consisted of injections of "fix'd air".

The false cures for cancer rise and fall like the tide, a thoroughly polluted tide. Some of them attain considerable vogue, but after a period disappear, then reappear, only to pass once more into oblivion. An interesting example of this cycle is provided by turpentine, which was first employed by Celsus, a famous Roman physician who was the contemporary of Christ. Sixteen centuries later another celebrated doctor, Paracelsus, used turpentine externally, and in 1696 it was given internally by a Dr. William Salmon. After a period of desuetude, it became fashionable again in 1837, when a Dr. Dewees gave it for uterine cancer. Once more it was forgotten until

1880, when another physician, John Clay, took to administering it in pill form for cancers of the womb.

Some of these doctors were not satisfied with ordinary turpentine, Dr. Clay, for example, insisting upon a kind which came only from the Isle of Chios, but others claimed with much vehemence that that which came from the Isle of Cyprus was equally good. Toward the end of the Nineteenth Century, many physicians of standing, even such a leader as Virchow in Germany, were employing turpentine, but it eventually fell into disfavor. In 1904 it was resurrected for a while, but finally it went completely into the discard.

Among the substances which have been used from time to time, and which, despite a constant lack of success, pop up every now and then, are: sheep-sorrel, raw cranberries, red clover-tops, kerosene, gasoline, onion juice, nicotine, amber from a pipe stem, water hemlock, lobelia plants, mouse-ear plants, garlic, swamproot, horse blood, candle grease, wild parsnip roots, goat's milk, blue clay, willow-tree juice, acorn coffee, oil of cloves, goose-grass juice, calendula flowers, spiderwebs, skunk and beaver oil, cheeseweed, cinnamon tea, pepper, fleur-de-lis, snails, and crabs.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century many advertised cancer cures were on the market. By appealing to gullible persons the vender of every such nostrum did incalculable harm, for by the time the patient discovered its worthlessness, he was beyond aid. In 1921 the Federal government filed a libel for the seizure of forty bottles of a substance labelled Diuretine, and twenty-four bottles of Bloodzone. The latter was asserted on the label to be a cure for scrofula, syphilis, cancer, rheumatism, catarrh, malaria, poisoning, chronic ulcers, boils, carbuncles, eczema, tetter, acne, psoriasis, salt rheum, pimples, and erup-

tions. Cancer is not, of course, a blood disease, and this remedy, consisting of extracts of plant leaves, with a laxative drug, sugar, alcohol, and water, could not by any stretch of the imagination exert any beneficial effect whatsoever.

Another typical cure-all, which the government also proceeded against in 1921, was Patten's Lightning Salve, compounded of camphor, turpentine, soap, rosin, tallow, bees-wax, and petrolatum. Not only was this mess alleged to cure cancer; it was claimed also to cure piles, fistula, neuralgia, felons, blood poison, diphtheria, tonsillitis, pneumonia, asthma, hay fever, stomach, kidney and bowel troubles, sore eyes, ulcers, backache, pain in any part of the body, erysipelas, dysentery, goitre, deafness, loss of voice, diarrhea, and spider-bite.

Of equal catholicity in its alleged therapeutic scope was a remedy called 2 Over 3, put out of business by the government in 1922. It consisted of crude oil containing small quantities of kerosene and gasoline. Other quack cures against which action has been taken at various times are Parry's Vegetable Compound, alleged to cure almost anything, M.I.S.T. No. 2 Nerve Tonic, Cancerol, Cancerine, Mixer's Cancer Ointment, Dr. O. A. Johnson's Mild Combination Treatment for Cancer, and a substance known as Purifico, which had been in the market since 1881, or for nearly fifty years, when action against it was taken in 1924.

When the mails are employed to exploit a quack cancer cure an investigation is made by the postal authorities. Samples of the nostrum are secured and chemical examinations of it are made in the laboratories of the government. If conditions warrant, a fraud order is issued after a hearing, and the manufacturer and his agents are denied the use of the mails. Thanks to this procedure, most of the mail-order cancer

treatments have been put out of business. One of those attacked was a preparation known as Radol, claimed to be abundantly supplied with radium emanations. Analysis revealed that it contained no more radioactive material than ordinary dish-water. A fluorescence had been induced by adding a small quantity of acidulated quinine sulphate. By no acrobatic use of the imagination could this concoction be conceived as doing any good in cases of cancer.

Many natural waters from so-called healing springs are alleged to contain radioactive substances, and occasionally the proprietor of such a water is rash enough to declare that its use would cure or relieve cancer. As a matter of fact, no radioactive water will perform such a miracle and there is none that is of any value whatsoever in the treatment of malignant disease. Radiation is efficacious only when it comes direct from radium or similar radioactive metals, or from x -rays.

Within six months after the announcement of the prize I have mentioned, which amounted to \$50,000, more than 1800 communications regarding alleged cancer cures were received by the American Society for the Control of Cancer, and before the offer expired on January 1, 1928, nearly 4000 remedies had been submitted. None was considered worthy of the award and the offer was withdrawn. "The touch of a seventh son in a family with no daughters between" is a good example of the type of "cure" suggested.

Practically all of these remedies came from laymen, some of whom were obviously illiterate, and some unquestionably demented. Among the substances proposed were herbs and plants, chemicals and extracts, mechanical devices, and living animals. Religious methods of cure and mystic rites were frequently included, along with all sorts of legerdemain. Some of the cures

were extremely complicated, others very simple. Only a few merited any consideration at all. Some specimens follow:

Avoid the use of crops raised by means of artificial manures.

Cut open a birch cancer on a tree and remove the brown spongy content. Dry and boil and take three tablespoons a day.

Eat a certain amount of garlic each week, and take a few drops of spruce oil once a month.

Don't use the tongue to lick postage stamps.

Apply a poultice of Turkish figs in milk.

Eat salted herrings, scales and bones, only remove the head. Eat until the cancer has all fallen off, bit by bit.

A certain live animal applied to the face, the patient to be kept in ignorance of the name of the animal.

A live crab with claws tied together, fastened upon the cancer, to remain until the crab is dead; then bury the crab.

Drink water in which green nettles have been boiled.

Abolish daylight-saving time.

Hold a live mole in the hand until it is dead. It acts as a magnet.

Avoid eating vegetables that have come in contact with angleworms, for angleworms are the cause of cancer.

Water from a blacksmith's tub into which the hot horse-shoes are plunged.

A vigorous crusade against cancer quacks has been waged for many years by the American Medical Association, acting through its Bureau of Investigation. Reports on various advertised cures and questionable sanatoria are given from time to time in the *Journal* of the Association, which has always been aggressive in its denunciation of quackery, whether without or within the medical profession. Some of the drastic, but well deserved, comments on various quacks in this magazine have resulted in threats of libel suits, and a few such actions have followed, although only rarely does a charlatan carry out a bluff of this nature.

With the decline of patent medicines there has arisen a new racket in the cancer cure field. The swindler who preys on patients and those who fear they have cancer has now turned to the management of a hospital or sanatorium as a cloak for his activities. Victims are lured to these institutions by means of circulars which proclaim that the owner possesses a remarkable remedy, invariably a secret and mysterious one, for cancer. The circulars, often elaborately printed, contain startling pictures of skin blemishes alleged to be malignant. A middle-aged person notices an apparently similar skin lesion on his own person and immediately thinks of cancer. He may even consult a physician who, if he is reputable and the condition warrants, advises a biopsy, or microscopic examination of the diseased tissue.

Because of his unnecessary fear, the sufferer postpones action and delays treatment. Eventually some well-meaning but deluded busybody tells him about the wonderful treatment at Dr. So and So's hospital, or else he gets hold of one of the glaring circulars. Without attempting to find out anything about the actual standing and reliability of the place and its sponsors, he either writes and gets a reassuring letter bidding him to come, or without troubling to write, packs up and goes to the so-called hospital.

The cure usually consists of repeated applications of an escharotic, which means in plain language a caustic or corrosive substance with a zinc or arsenic base. A lesion that may be only a benign blemish is eaten out by the caustic, the patient pays his hard-earned money, and comes away convinced that he has escaped a horrible death. Actually, he may have wasted valuable time and cash on a worthless remedy for a harmless condition. If, on the other hand, he really had a cancer, he has been mulcted

also, since chemicals cannot cure it. Lulled into a false sense of security, he discovers finally that he is worse off than before. Time is of the essence in the proper treatment of cancer.

Nothing is any easier to obtain than a testimonial. During the first flush of enthusiasm after a new "cure," a gullible patient, subtly urged on by a high pressure salesman, is not only willing but often eager to testify to its efficacy. Beside, he is flattered by the opportunity to get his name in print. So he deposes for the benefit of all mankind that Purifico or some other nostrum has worked wonders for him. A few years later, or possibly much sooner, he dies of the disease. The cemeteries are full of such testimonial-givers.

Sometimes respectable community leaders are induced by the quacks to submit to them the names of prospects. One charlatan sent form letters to ministers offering a fountain pen as a bonus for a list of names of cancer sufferers. To the discredit of some of the clergy, a large number of names were sent in. The quack generally finds it profitable to maintain an interest in religious matters and make bountiful contributions to churches. He also is a joiner, affiliating himself with many fraternal organizations and clubs, on the theory that the better his social connexions, the more numerous his prey.

A recent development in the testimonial game has been the use, or rather misuse of the radio. Fortunately, only a few radio stations have been guilty of giving time to cancer quacks, and these have already got into trouble as a result. Under the law, the Federal Radio Commission may revoke the license of a station if the utterances coming from it are contrary to the public interest. Early in 1931 such action was taken against a mid-western station which had been broadcasting a fake cancer cure.